Alien Big Cat Sightings in Britain: A Possible Rumour Legend?

MICHAEL GOSS

BRITAIN'S largest native carnivore averages 853mm in length and a little over 10kg in weight.[1] It is *Meles meles,* the well-known and inoffensive badger; our islands have had contact with no more formidable indigenous predator since the extinction of the wolf, *Canis lupus,* some three hundred years ago. But these zoological truisms seem to be contradicted by a wealth of newspaper reports which affirm that our country hosts surprisingly high numbers of pumas, 'panthers', lynxes and other fittingly-named 'alien big cats': a media phenomenon which has displayed fluctuating yet durable vitality over the past two decades without receiving much by way of critical examination.

From whence are these exotic animals supposed to have come? How come they to be ranging wild and free in a country which, as my introductory remarks defined, is not noted for a wealth of large carnivores? There are several acceptable responses. The big cats are releasees or escapees. They are former inmates of zoos, wildlife parks, private menageries or (if such things still exist) travelling circuses; specimens which have escaped or else been covertly released by former owners. Misidentification of native animals, whether wild (deer, foxes, mink, etc.) or domestic (ponies, dogs and cats, including feral cats), also presents itself as an explanation, particularly where reports suggest that the sightings were of brief duration, principally taking place unexpectedly and at night with the witnesses not infrequently situated inside a speeding vehicle. Then there are also a few responses less acceptable—to zoologists and other hyper-rational species, at least. One naturalist proposes that the cats *are* in fact indigenous to Britain—that they have been so since prehistoric times, yet without entering the field of ken represented by those constitutionally conservative zoologists just mentioned.[2] More esoteric thinkers dwell upon the strange elusiveness of the animals and put forward the idea that they are hallucinatory, paraphysical, 'thought-forms', symbolic expressions of environmental consciousness, or perhaps any combination of these.

But my intention here has less to do with the literal reality or unreality of the alien big cats and a good deal to do with them as a media artefact. I wish to concentrate upon the possibility that our news media have propagated a form of rumour legend which, regardless of its basic factuality or lack of it, conditions our very approach to the subject. I begin by quoting a short news item entitled, 'I faced (a) puma . . . in Wales' from the *Daily Mirror* of 24 January 1990:

> A woman out riding with her daughter claimed yesterday they came face to face with a puma . . . in Wales.
>
> Ann Phillips and 20-year-old Lorna watched the brown animal—the size of a great dane—in the bright sunlight for several minutes.
>
> The Beast of Margam has been reported for several years in the Margam Forest, West Glamorgan.
>
> Mrs. Phillips, of nearby Cwmavon, added: 'I think it was a puma.'
>
> Police said: 'Mrs. Phillips and her daughter are not prone to exaggeration.'

I daresay that many of the five-million-plus readers claimed by the *Daily Mirror* missed this ostensibly alarming article. It was tucked away in an insignificant corner of the page as if it was a matter of no real importance; but then, *Mirror* readers were not expected to think that it was important, much less alarming. It was a 'curiosity item': a page-filler, very likely adapted from the columns of a local or regional paper.

Dozens of stories like this have appeared recently in British papers. Their theme is consistent to the point of repetitiveness: a dangerous big cat loose in dangerous-big-cat-free Britain. Yet they are reported in a curiously matter-of-fact style that suggests the writers are not wholly interested in them; a style which suggests that an alien big cat report ranks much lower on the journalistic scale than a starlet's 'kiss and tell' memoirs or a small amateur football team's plans to upset their First Division opponents in a forthcoming cup-tie. When we read this kind of report in our morning papers, we do not expect a sequel to it in the same papers *next* morning. It is not likely that we will learn how the big cat came to be where it was, nor what became of it afterwards. The typical alien big cat story—like the animal upon which it is founded—appears as if from nowhere and vanishes just as rapidly, with the skill and finality of a ghost.

This *Daily Mirror* item could be styled typical in terms of presentation (e.g. its brevity and inconclusiveness) but also in terms of content. Here we have two named witnesses confronted by a big cat alien (non-native) to the British Isles. The animal is functionally described ('brown' and by inference cat-like) with recourse to a popular domestic dog breed, the Great Dane, as a point of comparison on size. The witness 'thinks' the brown animal was a puma (*Felis concolor,* otherwise known as the cougar or mountain lion and by several other vernacular names). It is worth remarking that the puma, though well represented in British zoos, has never been a 'high profile' big cat; for every ten Britons who have heard of it, perhaps only five could give a passably accurate description of what one looks like. Some zoologists, by the way, would claim that percentage to be optimistically high.[3] It follows that the number of Britons competent to identify a puma if they were to encounter one suddenly in the wild is likely to be low. All the news report sets against this is that the Phillipses saw the animal for several minutes in bright sunlight.

But perhaps the most interesting detail of this report is contained in its third paragraph. Here the writer implies that this was not the first time a puma (or something resembling one) had been witnessed in or around the area. Over 'several years' this part of Glamorgan has been exposed to the Beast of Margam. This kind of detail is intended to put the Phillips incident into a kind of historical perspective. Also, by suggesting that it was not a 'one-off' event but part of a cycle of events spanning several years, the journalist encourages readers to trust the article's veracity. We might dismiss one isolated puma story, but several over a period of years endows the animal with a degree of credibility. Philosophers may recognize in this Bayes's 'bundle of sticks' hypothesis: the proposition that just as a single stick can be snapped but not a bundle of them when held together, so several pieces of evidence presented in combination resist where a solitary item of evidence fails to convince.[4]

But what of this Margam Beast and its several-year reign of terror—if that is not too melodramatic a phrase to use of an animal which, from the *Daily Mirror's* account, seems indisposed to harm anyone? A previous article on a 'mountain lion' in Margam (or Margan) Forest, Glamorgan, appeared in the *Daily Express* of 13 September 1985

(page 10). Since it is too long to quote in full, the salient features beneath the sensational headline of 'Alert as a mountain lion terrifies woman in forest' may be summarized as follows:

1. There is a named witness (Mrs. Susan Howells, aged 35) who, interestingly and like the Phillips women five years later, encountered the alleged mountain lion while out riding.

2. Unlike the 1990 report, this *Daily Express* item specifies the place of the encounter (Kenfig Hill) and adds the helpful detail that Margan (*sic*) Forest covers 25,000 acres under the care of the Forestry Commission. The Forestry Commission is ultimately responsible for the care, maintenance and commercial exploitation of much of Britain's open spaces. Its policy of afforesting areas formerly devoted to heath, moor or mixed forestry with conifers has been criticized by environmentalists; Forestry Commission plantations tend to be dull, gloomy and as unattractive to many animal species as they are to the human eye. However, a Forestry Commission plantation might well be regarded as good puma habitat, the more so as deer thrive in these conditions.

3. The description of the animal and likewise the description of the witness's reaction to it are notably more dramatic than in the later (1990 *D.Mirror*) account. This may reflect an editorial decision. The *Daily Express's* report—published in 1985, when alien big cats were judged more newsworthy than they appear to be nowadays—was allotted 20cm of column space against the *Mirror's* seven cm. It stated that the cat was 'as tall as a Great Dane, fawn in colour and "savage-looking" '. It quoted Mrs. Howells as saying: 'It was definitely a big cat. My horse was terrified of it. It was shaking with fright and nearly bolted.' And later: 'The animal I saw was unquestionably a big cat like a mountain lion or a puma. It turned to face me before bounding off with its tail in the air.'

The wording here is ambiguous. Mrs. Howells speaks as if she thought the mountain lion and the puma are two different species (as some Britons suppose them to be). But her phrase, 'or a puma' may simply represent an attempt to clarify her meaning, e.g. 'It was a mountain lion—you know, what people usually call a puma.' It would be interesting to know if Mrs. Phillips, heroine of the 1990 incident, had read what Mrs. Howells had had to say five years previously and if so whether that influenced how she interpreted her own experience.

Mrs. Howells is also quoted as believing the animal 'must be dangerous to children,' and is said to have wanted it hunted down and killed. The note of menace—especially of risk to children, often tacitly conveyed rather than openly stated—is fairly routine in British big cat stories. There are very few authenticated reports of puma attacks upon humans from any part of the animal's range.[5] Needless to say, in our purely British context the putative risk has never been borne out by events (i.e. actual attacks).

4. The article reveals features typical of British alien big cat reports, but typical also of many other classes of journalism. There is the use of 'authority figures' to corroborate or otherwise enhance the witness's otherwise upsupported testimony. Thus we find statements and opinions solicited here from, firstly, a Forestry Commission official. This spokesperson confirmed that plaster casts of a big cat's pawprints had been taken (but did not say what had been concluded from them, if anything) and appealed for people not to hunt the 'harmless' animal with guns, adding that it would have plenty of wild sheep and deer to feed upon in the forest. Then there is a comment from a police spokesman: 'We are obviously concerned about people's safety. We have searched the area, but it is an impossible task.'

Both these sources voice a standard explanation for the cat's presence in the forest; an explanation which appears in alien big cat reports with monotonous frequency, but which may not be completely inappropriate. The informants believe (*sic*) that the animal 'may have been a pet, and has grown too big to handle and freed in the forest'.

While the police and Forestry Commission represent crucial corroborative sources on a local level—being, by virtue of their position and proximity to the event, informed sources—the writer enlists additional authorization from independent experts: zoo officials who, merely by virtue of the fact that they *are* zoo officials, may be presumed to know all about pumas. Thus we hear from a Bristol Zoo official, who testifies that big cats normally stay away from people in the wild, but are 'potentially dangerous if cornered or hungry,' and from a Whipsnade Zoo official, who is sceptical about the ability of a puma to survive wild in Margan Forest. This negative response from one of Britain's largest zoological collections—Whipsnade is the Bedfordshire annex of the Zoological Society of London—may seem to damage the article, but in fact it is an asset to it. The response provides a note of scepticism required for such an article, giving the appearance of balanced reporting as well as acting as an effective contrast with the eyewitness's statement.

5. Finally (although in the original it is centrally positioned between responses from Forestry Commission and zoo officials) there is the information that sheep have been killed in the area: two ewes, plus a newborn calf, the latter 'taken from its mother, dragged across a field and eaten'. The identity of the killer is not *stated*, but in the context of the article we are plainly meant to infer it was the puma. Emphasis on livestock-killings or mutilations from areas in which alien big cats have been reported is another common feature of such reporting.[6] In fact, some articles give the impression that sheep-slaughterings were the chief reason that big cat rumours arose in the first place. Commonly-made assertions here may include: the statement that the number of sheep killed or injured is far in excess of the farmer's experience; that the wounds are unusual and (on 'expert opinion') typical of those inflicted by a large cat; and arising from the last point, that dogs have been excluded as the cause of the havoc. This clause is necessary, since practically everyone is aware that feral or 'renegade' domestic dogs are the most probable explanation for sheep-worrying and/or sheep-killing.

Cases of sheep-killing on an unusual scale (and reputedly by one single predator) are of historical interest, and although they threaten to lead me beyond the scope of this paper I would like to discuss them briefly. It is simply that sporadic outbreaks of nocturnal sheep-slaughter in Britain during the 19th and early 20th centuries provide definite parallels with our modern big cat stories. Where we once used to blame unknown 'beasts' or 'wolves', we now blame 'big cats'.

In the British cases I have studied (Ennerdale, 1810; Cavan, Ireland 1874; Hexham, 1904/5; Sevenoaks, 1905; Edale, 1925) the press tended to give the impression that a solitary, wary and uncatchable mystery animal was at work.[7] Yet in none of those instances was it suggested that the culprit was a big cat; that appears to be a very recent press phenomenon. And in most if not all of these cases, the animals concerned did not remain unidentified mysteries for long; they were trapped, shot, or otherwise disposed of. The majority proved to be domestic dogs (some crossbreeds or mongrels) but a few were veritable alien species: wolves (Hexham) or jackals (Sevenoaks—we could add here the case of the Epping Forest 'wolves' which turned out to be jackals, from 1884/85).[8]

How they came to be in Britain is not clear, but my data suggest they were introduced by mistake—and by the hunting fraternity, who purchased them from animal dealers under the belief they were buying fox cubs.

Returning to more modern times, sheep-killing can be a critical element in the more dramatic big cat stories. Besides excusing a more sensational tone of journalism—if the feline villain slaughters sheep, who is to say it will not progress to killing children?—it seems to strike the press as proof-positive of the cats' existence. By direct contrast, some researchers regard sheep-killings as very dubious evidence, or as events perhaps unrelated to the big cat sightings in the same area. My own belief, based on accounts of how feral or renegade dogs attack sheep, leads me to think the 'phantom felines' are innocent of the charge.

I also believe that, taken together, these two reports of the Margan or Margam Beast are good examples of a British newspaper trend or phenomenon which has become increasingly apparent, though never on any predictable seasonal or cyclical basis, since the middle years of the 1960s. That is: since that approximate date, British newspapers have sporadically carried reports of the kind just summarized. It would be useful to support this by specifying *how many* such reports there have been, but I can do no more than guess: perhaps as many as two hundred, perhaps more. The pair I selected to introduce this paper were not chosen for any superior dramatic value or unusual interest; for me, their main appeal resides in their typicality. Press handling of the Margan Beast reveals features which will be present to a greater or lesser extent in *any* account of an alien big cat loose in Britain.

1. An eyewitness (usually named) is said to have encountered a species of big cat not native to the British Isles.

2. The setting for this encounter is likely to be some area of open land, but this term can encompass such open ground as occurs in suburban or even urban areas, e.g. parks, golf courses, railway embankments, and it does not preclude urban environments (streets, back gardens) where exotic large cats might be thought doubly or trebly out of place.

3. The encounter is usually of brief duration (a matter of minutes) and may occur at day or night. The witness may be on foot, motoring (or riding, as at Margan), alone or with one or more other people.

4. The animal's description varies per report. References to particular species which appear in newspaper accounts like brand-names on food products ('puma', 'lion', 'panther', 'lynx', and—less commonly—'cheetah' or 'tiger') sound more like journalistic terms of convenience than strict zoological labels. The witness's qualifications for making positive species identification are not heavily stressed and may be glossed over by such formulaic expressions as: 'It was definitely a big cat', or 'It was definitely not a dog'. The reports may include rough size indicators (e.g. 'bigger than a Labrador/Great Dane'—two breeds of dog with which British readers will be familiar at once—or, less dramatically 'bigger than an ordinary cat/bigger than a fox'). Other physical details also tend to be formula-like ('a long tail . . . sandy-coloured . . . black . . . tufted ears') and it is possible that the accessibility of these phrases influences how witnesses describe the animals or how journalists tend to describe them. Taken *en masse*, the reports suggest that the only common characteristics shared by these animals are: that they are (in the witnesses' judgement) cat-like and (ditto) larger than normal domestic cats.

5. One sighting of the cat may be connected (by the media) with reports of others within the same general area. These grouped reports may be separated by days, months or years. My approaches to various local or regional papers incline me to think that newspapers maintain files of material from their past editions, indexed by place, person or topic. This facilitates retrieval and collation; it also has the characteristic of pulling events together into patterns which may or may not be spurious.

6. In many cases involving recurrent sightings, the animal may acquire a popular label: 'the *Margam* Beast', 'the *Thorganby* Lioness', 'the *Fobbing* Puma'. This creates for them a local identity. Whether or not such labelling is useful and whether or not it is purely an artefact of the press are open questions.

7. Stated or tacit is the assumption that the animals are, or could be, dangerous to humans—especially to children.

8. Physical evidence of the alleged animals may be cited in the reports: slaughtered or injured livestock and pawprints, as we heard of in the Margam case, but perhaps also hair samples, faeces, etc. Deer carcases may feature as evidence of predation. Photographs are seldom produced, however.

9. The typical report will cite or quote authority figures: the police, zoo officials, environmental managers, menagerie owners, naturalists and occasionally big game hunters. The police can be expected to confirm that they are 'taking it seriously'. However, sceptical responses may be quoted (usually in brief and towards the end of the article).

10. The favourite explanation for the presence of the cats is that they are escapees from zoos or wildlife collections, or perhaps released, unwanted pets. In the 'classic' reports, the owners are never traced.

11. Organized hunts, official or unofficial, may be conducted. Insofar as the hunters almost never bring back their big cat they may be considered futile, though their failure adds to the mystery-element. In areas where heavy and extensive cover exists (e.g. Margam Forest) these failures are explicable; we might echo what the *Daily Express's* police spokesman said about it being a hopeless task. In heavily urbanized areas like South London, venue for the Shooter's Hill 'cheetah' hunt of 1963,[9] they are largely *in*explicable.

12. The mystery cat drops simultaneously out of sight and out of the newspapers. We cannot rule out the possibility that newspaper editors grow tired of such stories and begin to doubt their long-term audience appeal within a few days.

I am far from suggesting that these 'mystery cats' are a uniquely British phenomenon. I know they are not, since my files hold material from the United States, Australia and parts of Europe which indicates the universality of alien big cat reports. One recent instance is the 'Bagheera panic' that hit Rome in the early part of 1990, when parents allegedly kept their children off the streets from fear of a sheep-killing and highly mobile panther; an escaped pet, it was said, who owed his name to the Italian journalists, not to mention Kipling's *Jungle Book*. Setting aside the detail of the Roman backdrop (which later gave way to Milanese, Florentine and Anconian equivalents as the animal seemed to migrate northwards) the story was in all respects typical of our own British phantom felines, down to the finale when 'the black beast vanished into thin air'.[10] In France, big cat sightings have become frequent in the 1980s, overlapping with an older tradition of 'wolf' or unspecified 'beast' sightings; the material is fully discussed by Véronique Campion-Vincent elsewhere in this issue.[10a]

But there is one factor which might suggest that alien big cat stories are oddly at home in Britain. Unlike the USA (where there are bears, pumas, lynxes, wolves, coyotes) or most parts of Europe (which has at least vestigial populations of large carnivore species) Britain has virtually *no* large wild animals of any sort. Even the red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) is only 'semi-wild' in many districts. To recapitulate, our largest 'official' carnivore is the badger; we lost our native wolf population centuries ago—precisely when is a matter of dispute.[11] We have no large wild cats, the lynx having disappeared at some period of the Ice Age (due, it is said, to the moistening of our climate) and just one small-to-medium sized wild cat which will be discussed below. Perhaps this total absence of large and potentially dangerous predators makes reports of 'phantom felines' more attractive—more exciting for us. Some Fortean writers have affirmed that the Big Cat may be a symbol of our wish to return to a wilder, less urbanized environment. Such a symbol would be peculiarly apt for Britain: a small country which has never managed to reconcile its interest in and genuine love of animals with its need or greed for land on which to accommodate an over-large population.

Another pressing point about the alien big cat stories is their apparent lack of historical continuity. Here they differ sharply from practically all other classes of those anomalous phenomena which have come to be lumped together under the label 'Fortean'. A researcher into UFOs, or spontaneous human combustion, or cryptozoology, is able to turn back the pages—is able to turn from current, contemporary reports and to locate analogous cases in the literature of the past. Sometimes the analogy will be a loose one and the researcher's establishment of it questionable, as when a writer on UFO abductions such as Jacques Vallee[12] cites folk-tales of people stolen by the fairies as culturally-contoured case-histories in the context of close encounters of the third (or fourth) kind. Nonetheless, it has become accepted practice for an 'anomalist' to scan the literature, archives or folklore of previous centuries for material bearing an analogy with contemporary phenomena. Thus the Loch Ness Monster may have been identified as a distinct phenomenon as late as 1933, when the first newspaper accounts of it appeared; but writers were quick to discover much earlier material which established for 'Nessie' a centuries-old pedigree. Though some if not all of the historical Nessie analogues are no longer held to be trustworthy (I am thinking particularly of Binns's demolition of the alleged eighth-century account of the monster in the *Life of St. Columba*),[13] this kind of verification by reference to historical data remains valid and popular among writers.

Or consider the corn- or crop-circle phenomenon. Until quite recently the strange circular markings which have appeared in British cornfields were open to sceptical dismissal on the grounds that the phenomenon did not seem to have been reported earlier than a decade or so before. The modernity looked suspicious—where were the historical analogues? A 1678 pamphlet entitled 'The Mowing Devil' (reprinted when *Fortean Times* gave over most of an entire issue to the crop circle enigma) appears to go a long way towards answering that question.[14] Since ufologists are not uniformly agreed on the relevance of the pamphlet to the corn circle controversy, it may be ill-advised to abandon all critical faculties here. Acknowledging that, and allowing as always for errors which may arise when we try to interpret stylistics of earlier centuries with the intellectual apparatus of our own age, the contents of 'The Mowing Devil' seem to prove the rule that there is no new anomaly under the sun and that, given time, some industrious researcher is bound to turn up a historical precedent for one that poses as new.

I do not say that any or every anomalous phenomenon *must* furnish historical analogues of itself if we are (in the phrase of the stereotypical police spokesman) to 'take it seriously'. I point out only that we might expect some kind of published record of alien big cats in Britain prior to the 1990s. But upon investigation, there is a disappointing paucity of any such historical analogues of our modern mystery cat reports.

There is little aid to be found on this point in anything published on the alien big cat phenomenon so far. Several writers[15] quote the passage from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England Scotland and Ireland* (1577, 1587) which goes:

> Lions we have had very many in the North parts of Scotland, and those with manes of no less force [= size? prominence?] than they of Mauretania were sometimes reported to be; but how and when they were destroyed as yet I do not read.

I ignore here the question of whether Holinshed wrote this passage, rather than one of several other writers who are known to have worked on the non-English sections of the *History*. For whoever wrote it is obviously quoting somebody else, and on an animal which just as obviously was no longer extant at the time of writing.

Holinshed was the historian chiefly remembered for having provided Shakespeare with much of the plot-material for his history plays. What has been said of Shakespeare's versions of history—that they cannot be relied upon as factual reportage of events—is also true of Holinshed's. Sixteenth-century historians did not write factual history as we know it today. Uncritical regurgitation of second- or third-hand material, including rumour, conjecture and fabrication, was not the exception but the rule. We must treat this account cautiously. At once it is evident that the author was borrowing from another writer; he says he 'as yet' does not read when or where the 'lions' were destroyed, meaning that his source does not tell him. There is no reason to suppose that Holinshed ever saw one of these 'Scottish lions'—nor, come to that, need we believe that his source had seen any. The passage is purely hearsay, and the 'manes of force' a verbal embellishment.

Scotland may not have had lions, but in popular nineteenth-century zoological parlance it had its 'tiger'. This was the name bestowed upon the Scottish wildcat, *Felis silvestris*, as much in tribute to its reputed savagery as to the dark stripes on its grey or buff hide. The 'Scottish wildcat' is none other than the European wildcat, though I believe that many zoologists accord it subspecific status (*Felis silvestris grampia*). Until recently it was confined to those 'North parts' mentioned by Holinshed, namely to the Scottish Highlands regions. In orthodox terms this wildcat is not large enough to be mistaken for a tiger, a panther or even a puma. A standard text like G. B. Corbet and H. N. Southern's *Handbook of British Mammals* says that it is 'Typically larger than a domestic cat', giving measurements of 589mm head/body, 315mm tail and weight of 5.1kg.[16] Interestingly, this animal has a long-standing record of breeding with both domestic and feral cats (*F.cattus*), sometimes producing offspring of unusual size and coloration. Reports of black (melanistic) wildcats, or even a new British cat species, which emerged from Kellas, West Moray, in 1985-87 are now referred to this hybridization—which some writers regard as a more serious threat to the purebred Scottish wildcat than the traditional perscution by gamekeepers and deforestation of its habitat.[17] It will not spoil the impact of my conclusion if I say that exceptionally large feral cats (with or without wildcat genes) number among the more popular scientific explanations of alien big cats.

The same animal(s) may have featured in another oft-cited historical extract. While visiting the ruinous Waverley Abbey at Farnham, Surrey, on or about 27 October 1825, as he details in his *Rural Rides,* the Radical writer and philosopher William Cobbett pointed out to his son an old hollow tree of some five metres in circumference,

> . . . into which I, when a very little boy, once saw a cat go that was as big as a middle-sized spaniel dog . . . I would take my oath of it to this day. When I was in New Brunswick I saw the great wild grey cat, which is there called a Lucifee; and it seemed to me to be just such a cat as I had seen at Waverley.

Cobbett does not attach dates to his sightings of this spaniel-sized cat or to his residence in New Brunswick, which falls within the distribution range of both lynx and puma. Certain writers (presumably following the Bords in their *Alien Animals*)[18] have assumed that Cobbett was referring to the latter species. This would be intriguing if confirmed, since Farnham lies in that part of Surrey famous over a century afterwards for sightings of a puma-like big cat. However, the Oxford University Press's *Dictionary of American English* makes it clear that 'lucifee' (lucivee, leusifee, lucervee) had been used since 1791 and most likely before then as a contraction of 'loup cervier': the Canadian lynx. In retrospect, Cobbett's description—the 'spaniel dog' size, the grey coat—fits the lynx better than the puma. Perhaps the distinction does not matter: a lynx would have been as much out of place in the Surrey of 1825 as a puma.

Cobbett was born in 1763; one can reasonably suppose that when he talks of having been 'a very little boy' at the time of his Waverley Abbey adventure he is covering any period up to, say, 1775. He served in New Brunswick with the 54th Foot Regiment of the British Army between 1784-1791; patently, he saw his 'lucifee' at some time between those years. Thus in 1825, as a mature adult, Cobbett recalls an animal he saw in Surrey when 'a very little boy' (?1763-1775) which he only identified (and by analogy) after seeing another large cat in New Brunswick during the period 1784-1791. We would be justified in treating this witness's accuracy as open to doubt, given the lapse of time between the two events. And, suggestive as it may appear, Cobbett's account tells us little more about the Farnham animal than that it was (to his retrospective judgement and across a considerable gulf of years) a large grey lynx-like cat. (Or rather, the 'lucifee' was 'just such a cat' as he had seen years before at Farnham).

I would not care to guess precisely what Cobbett saw, but it would not surprise me to learn that it was neither lynx nor puma, but an abnormally large British wildcat or (much more likely) a feral cat which mimicked the lynx in size, colour and even (as some do) rudimentary ear tufts. If I seem hesitant here, it is because the feat of distinguishing between an authentic wildcat (*F. silvestris*) and a domestic cat (*F. cattus*) gone wild which outwardly resembles one is not always straightforward. Victorian naturalists seem to have suffered from a similar sense of confusion. We have to concede that it is not totally impossible that the animal which Cobbett saw run into the 'cat-elm' (*his* phrase) might have been one of the last remaining English wildcats. *F. silvestris* has been confined to the Scottish Highlands for a century or more; over the past twenty years there have been reports that it has extended its range southwards into the Border country, and there have been unconfirmed reports that it may have entered the Lake District of northwestern England. As an English species, though, its tenancy is thought to have ended by the late 1800s. I have seen several references in Victorian journals like *The Zoologist* which suggest that individual specimens hung on in England as far

south as Hampshire,[19] permitting the speculation that Cobbett may have been privileged to have witnessed one of these rare survivals. But there is the old problem that feral cats can resemble their wildcat counterparts in size and coloration, so much that it takes a good zoologist to distinguish between the genuine article and a large feral tom *cattus*; the decisive criteria are, furthermore, osteological rather than visual. Personally and reluctantly, I would conclude that these Victorian 'English wildcats' were ferals. A Surrey wildcat in 1763-1775 would not be out of the question, but on balance a feral would be more likely, and some readers may feel that it would be straining the evidence to insist that Cobbett saw one of the last surviving English wildcats. And it would be straining his evidence even more to insist that he could have seen a lynx.

Rural Rides dates from the time when natural history, as an active pursuit open to both lay enthusiast and professional scientist alike, was about to reach the crest of its popularity. An army of Victorian lepidopterists, ornithologists, fern-collectors and other field-workers—and the publications of national, regional and local natural history societies to which they communicated their findings—enriched the annals of British flora and fauna.[20] The hunt for new species was relentless; the erroneous proposals of new species based upon single aberrant specimens reached epidemic proportions. If a British Big Cat had been out there, they would surely have found it. If so small, inconspicuous and locally-distributed a creature as the smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*) could not elude the species-hunters, what hope would there have been for as large and obvious an animal as a puma or leopard?[21] Of course, there may well have been published references to sightings which I have missed. Yet on the evidence so far known to me, the nineteenth-century sources appear to be ominously silent as far as alien big cats are concerned.

It could be objected that written records are poor and partial reflections of any situation. Perhaps a wealth of *oral testimony* concerning big cats was prevalent in nineteenth-century Britain, and the newspapers, natural history journals, etc., did not pick it up—did not print anything about it. Personally again, I doubt the credibility of this notion, but I have found two references to localized beliefs that escaped wild animals had naturalized or habituated themselves in parts of the country. The first was in the *Daily Telegraph* of 10 October 1859;[22] the second came from a correspondent of that highly useful source on Victorian learning, *Notes & Queries* (5th Series, iii, 20 February 1875). The writer mentions tales of a bear loose near Birmingham, a lion in the Teme Valley and wolves at large between Malvern and Worcester. 'It would be interesting to know how far tales of this kind have spread, and what foundation lies at the bottom of the epidemic,' he concludes—without understating the case.

Significantly, both writers treat these stories as examples of popular credulity. Modern researchers would be more tolerant, filing what these decidedly sceptical critics have to say as evidence of an oral tradition concerning dangerous wild animals alleged to have escaped from travelling circuses and menageries. The 'Travelling Circus/Menagerie Escapee' and its close relative, the 'Escaped (or Dumped) Pet' are two more motifs commonly invoked in alien big cat stories—a piece of rationalizing attached to explain the otherwise incredible. As far as ninteenth-century England is involved, it is a line of thought by no means ridiculous, because there is plenty of evidence that such escapes occurred from time to time. The beasts were usually recaptured, it is true—but, we might ask, were they *all* recaptured?

The Out-of-Place Animal story (of which the Alien Big Cat is a type or subtype) is quite obviously a variant upon other reportedly true 'alien contaminations' of our

culture found in contemporary legend.[23] By the turn of the century the 'escaped dangerous animal' motif was sufficiently well known to have worked its way into popular fiction. For example, W. W. Jacobs, author of a huge canon of comic short stories, used it in 'A Tiger Skin' (from *The Lady of the Barge,* 1902), where the local poacher spreads rumours of a tiger in the woods to facilitate his nefarious activities.

Nowadays we would class such stories as contemporary legends or rumour legends, citing perhaps the celebrated New York sewer alligators in justification.[24] This would be to admit that this branch of modern folklore frequently echoes anomalous or 'Fortean' themes—so called after the American writer Charles Fort (1875-1932), who collected accounts of all kinds of allegedly 'inexplicable' phenomena, while refusing to interpret them or to judge their truth or falsity. The informational content may be the same in both fields, but there is a functional difference between them. If contemporary legend deals with stories which pose as being true but usually are not, Forteana consist of stories which seem too incredible to be true, but which (Forteans claim) actually *are* true. How we file newspaper reports of alien big cats depends on our attitude to the reliability of what appears in our newspapers.

But it might be argued that anyone looking for pre-twentieth-century accounts of alien big cats would do well to consider not only Victorian counterparts of our modern rumour legends, but legends in general, or indeed the wide field of folklore itself where—again, arguably—true-life accounts of actual events might exist disguised as folktales, legends and the like. Pursuing this line of inquiry does not, however, ward off disappointment.

British folklore is not strong in stories featuring 'monster cats'. We have 'magic cats' and talking cats in fairytales; there are supernatural cats which appear in narratives associated with witchcraft, of course, but there appears to be no oral tradition of monsters taking a form or size that permits us to interpret them as lions or lynxes, panthers or pumas. The reprinted records of folklore (upon which we are all dependent sooner or later) are partial records; some stories may never be collected and hence are not written down. But had alien big cat prototypes figured strongly in British oral tradition, I would have expected Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* to contain more references—and more persuasive references—than it does.

There is a handful of 'dangerous cat' folk-stories, like the one commemorated on a tomb at Barnborough, Yorkshire, in Anthony Dent's excellent book, *The Lost Beasts of Britain* (1974).[25] These relate unmistakably to real cats—not to panthers, pumas and so forth, however, but to the wildcat (*F. silvestris*), which was not yet extinct in England at the time these legends arose. And there is another fascinating tale in Jeremy Harte's *Cuckoo Pounds and Singing Barrows* (1986), a study of folklore concerning the prehistoric sites of Dorset. He writes that a tale of 'a wild and savage Cat', a 'monster cat with eyes as big as tea-saucers' which haunted the hill fort known as Sturminster Newton castle, was extant till the 1820s, for one resident recalled it as a story that terrified both children and adults into avoiding the place at night. Mr. Harte adds that this legend, or one like it, resurfaced later as the 'Shillingstone Castle Cat', where the animal in question was described as 'a large black cat with staring eyes and a luminous tail'. He suggests a continuity of tradition linking this creature with modern reports of alien big cats ('quasi-zoological apparitions', he calls them) in Dorset.[26]

Mr. Harte also suggests that our modern reports imply a link or continuity with 'the phantom black dogs of conventional folklore'. In complete contrast with the dearth of big cat stories, British folklore abounds with huge Black Dogs, many of them equipped

with the staring, saucer-sized eyes of the Sturminster Newton Cat. Such stories (presented as allegedly real-life accounts) are not totally extinct in Britain today, but they are comparatively scarce;[27] it is as if the type has lost the imaginative potency it held for centuries in rural districts.

Di Francis, for whom alien big cat sightings are evidence of a previously unrecorded native-British big cat—a species surviving from the Ice Age, yet miraculously unnoticed by the numerous naturalists of our small island—has tried to use the Black Dog to prove that the existence of the panther-like felines was known to former generations. *If* this British Big Cat existed since those times immemorial, surely there would be *some* record of it. The writer insists that record is folklore, oral tradition, of Black Dogs. According to her, when the old legend-tellers spoke of big black dogs, they really meant big black *cats*.[28]

Having studied a fair sample of Black Dog legends—and while acknowledging that some have a few points of similarity with our modern big cat accounts—I cannot agree with this reconstruction at all. The Black Dogs of folklore were not misidentified cats; they were unambiguously black dogs. More readily can I agree with Jeremy Harte that:

> It is as if the great cat apparitions formed a secondary class of ghosts which only began to thrive after the eclipse of black dog traditions; one thinks of the parallel, the conflict of red and grey squirrels.[29]

When may that eclipse have taken place? As far as I can see, the critical period—the period at which the Alien Big Cat legend type caught the imagination of public and press—was at some time in the early 1960s.

By use of the term 'legend type', I do not imply that all the big cat reports in our newspapers are legends in the literal sense that the felines are not real, flesh-and-blood animals; for, as I will mention presently, there is ample evidence that *some* sightings refer to actual, living and breathing big cats. What I mean is that in the 1960s an abundance of press reportage helped to formulate an enthusiasm for stories of this kind—helped to create an image which increased the likelihood that there would be more alien cat stories. The animal with which I credit this achievement (and for the record, I think that it may have been a real animal rather than an imaginary or media-fabricated one) was the Surrey Puma.

By 1964 the Surrey Puma had graduated from being a purely local story to a national news item. The idea of a puma loose in the Surrey woods (and only thirty miles away from Piccadilly Circus, as one magazine article pointed out)[30] was novel; it caught the imagination. It created an impact and an enduring image. I do not have space to do full justice to the history of the Surrey Puma: I must restrict myself to saying that from modest origins and rare sightings in 1959 and 1962, it escalated into a phenomenon with its own personality. All the features we heard of in the case of the Margam Forest beast were present plus reports of livestock attacks, a detail which drew extra attention to the animal. The 'hottest' period of interest was between September 1964 and August 1966, when the Godalming (Surrey) police logged 362 official reports of sightings, 42 of which were treated as valid, credible or both. A noted zoologist, Dr. Maurice Burton, investigated—and voted as negatively on the Surrey Puma as he had done just a few years prior upon that better-known animal mystery, the Loch Ness Monster.[31] He put the sightings down to uninformed misidentifications of feral cats and the plaster casts of pawprints initially identified as a puma's he attributed to a large dog, e.g. a

bloodhound. But the Puma did not go away. Nor was it ever captured. As a matter of interest, we are still receiving occasional reports of alien big cats from Surrey a quarter of a century later.

What the Surrey Puma did was establish a popular awareness or consciousness of alien big cats loose on our British doorsteps. Each successive stage of the story taught us what to expect. We came to learn the nature of big cat sightings; we heard that witnesses would talk of a large sandy-coloured animal with a long tail. The police would be 'taking it seriously'. There would be slaughtered or injured livestock somewhere in the story. And the Cat would not be captured.

In a sense, each 'phantom feline' story that followed only duplicated the Surrey phenomenon, including its elusiveness in the face of attempts to capture it. It was not until 1983 that the Surrey Puma was upstaged: by the terrible sheep-slaughtering 'Black Beast of Exmoor' which has been variously identified over the years as a panther, a puma, a lynx, a feral dog of supreme ugliness, a bear and a wolverine. Or possibly a permutation of several of these; as in the case of the Surrey Puma but on a much larger scale, the sheer volume of sightings and livestock attacks demands that we believe more than one animal to be at work. It has been said that the 265 square miles of the Exmoor National Park and its surroundings could and perhaps do support several unrelated big cats. After wading through the kilometres of newsprint this mystery Beast has inspired, one is reluctant to rule out anything.

While reports of the Exmoor Beast continue to trickle in, there have also been sightings of pumas and lynxes on the Isle of Wight, yet more black panthers at Horndon in Essex and Thetford in Norfolk, and yet another puma in Durham. Not forgetting that something reminiscent (to journalists' thinking) of Conan Doyle's Hound of the Baskervilles has been howling and attacking sheep in the depths of Powys, Wales.[32] But unless I am mistaken, there are some indications that newspaper editors are growing weary of the story. Although the reports continue to appear in our national papers, they are brief and isolated ones like the article on the Margan Forest cat quoted at the start of this discussion, not mini-series like the Surrey Puma or the Black Beast of Exmoor. The glorious days when the *Daily Express* offered £250 for the first photograph of the Exmoor animal (and was heavily criticized for endangering public safety in doing so) seem to be gone. It is time to assess what we have seen already.

Peculiar as it may appear, I accept the fact of some actual alien big cats in Britain. I am aware that the vast majority of sightings can be explained, definitely or conjecturally, as errors: well-meaning, honest witnesses have been deluded into mistaking ordinary animals for creatures more exciting by far. Ponies, deer and foxes may account for some cases; abnormally large or otherwise unusual-looking feral cats (not excluding hybrids) for still more. Dogs, especially the Labrador with its puma-like sandy coat, and almost certainly a few of the stranger-looking mongrels, must figure frequently in these cases. Dr. Burton also nominates feral dogs, solitary and shy animals which reverse normal behaviour patterns by living independent of Man.[33] Despite all this, I believe that there may be a few pumas surviving in parts of the British countryside. I would not rule out the possibility of lynxes, either, while there is irrefutable evidence that other exotic if lesser-known species have covertly made their way into our rural and semi-rural recesses.

The motorist who ran over and killed a swamp cat near Bedhampton on Hayling Island, Hampshire, in 1988 might agree with me. The 'lynx-like' small felid was positively identified by a Marwell Zoo official as *Felis chaus* (also vernacularly known as the jungle

or reed cat), a species widely distributed across the Near and Middle East and down through the Indian peninsula, though—needless to say—not native to Hayling Island.[34] Regardless of that—regardless, too, of a MAFF spokesman's opinion that the animal was a 'one-off'—further sightings of 'miniature cheetahs' took place in the latter half of 1989 from the same locale. To suggest that a small colony of swamp cats has found a home for itself on Hayling Island does not seem an incautious statement. Attempting to tie it or them in with another *F. chaus* found dead in a wood near Ludlow, Shropshire, in 1989 may, however, be less advisable. Perhaps we should confine ourselves to saying that the episode teaches us only that more people keep swamp cats as pets than prior expectation would have deemed likely. Or that more swamp cats escape from captivity more often than prior expectation would have deemed likely.

A visually more attractive pet than a swamp cat would be *Felis bengalensis*: an Asian leopard cat, like the one shot on Dartmoor near Widdecombe in April 1988, which was never traced to zoo, wildlife park nor any other private owner.[35] But these, of course, were small animals. It is essential to balance the picture with a brief mention of the Cannich Puma, if only because it contradicts the rule about alien big cats never being caught. Back in October 1980 a spate of otherwise typical 'puma' sightings around the Inverness-shire town of Cannich terminated spectacularly with the capture of an *actual* puma; doubts were raised as to how long the six-year-old, tame and rheumatoid animal had been living in the wild, though none dispelled the idea that it *had* managed to do so. Incidentally, this puma is still to be seen in the city of Inverness. It has become a stuffed and mounted museum exhibit.[36] Happily, it did not die of gunshot nor poison, but of old age.

Unoriginal as the thought must be, I attribute these 'findings' to the taste for and trade in exotic pets—or rather, to the unreported escapes and surreptitious releases of exotic pets. This may represent a trend which came into being with the introduction of legislation to curb the purchase of 'Dangerous Wild Animals' in 1976. I gather that even today it is possible for a person so minded to acquire a puma, for example, if he or she has the money and the licence. And I am also led to believe that not everyone who has the money for a puma goes through all the bother and formality of acquiring a licence.

However, these releasees and escapees are not likely to feature permanently among the recognized British fauna. I can imagine them surviving fairly comfortably in their chosen areas (if not run over or shot) for the duration of their natural life-spans. But to hypothesize that they will breed and eventually rank as valid British species, just as the Indian porcupine has done in Devon and the rednecked wallaby has done in Derbyshire—and as the American mink has done virtually everywhere—is another matter.[37] Nor do I suggest that each and every alien big cat report (even where blatant misidentifications are removed from the reckoning) can be referred to actual animals. Far from it: it is hardly conceivable that the huge numbers of big cats represented by newspaper data are literally real animals. Logistics argue against this; the idea of so many pumas and panthers prowling so small a country as Britain without getting themselves caught is incredible in itself.

Nonetheless, if we accept that our database contains even a few authentic big cats, are we then justified in talking of the Alien Big Cat as a form of contemporary legend? By definition, a legend is presented as factual history when the events with which it deals are imaginary. Does it not degrade these exotic felines to talk of them as 'legends'?

I would reply that it is how the reports are processed and presented by the press—the

characteristics of that reportage—which allows the use of that term. It is a matter, not of whether the story contains a kernel of truth, but of how that story is told and the intention behind the telling of it. My response to the British alien big cat phenomenon is conditioned by the idea that much of the information relating to it shows heavy media influence. The press—perhaps the most active transmitter or propagator of contemporary legend in our day—has taken up a form of rumour-legend or 'belief tale' concerning large, potentially dangerous escaped wild animals which can be traced with certainty back to the last century. It has come to mould the central motif of that legend type into the form of the Alien Big Cat. The immense public interest in the Surrey Puma affair may have encouraged the use of that story cycle as a prototype. Since then, the range of characteristics and optional features outlined at the start of this paper have remained fairly consistent or constant. Chief among these we find eyewitness accounts of brief, transient events (the sightings, the encounters) corroborated only by 'expert' opinion, with the 'serious reaction' of the police a routine addition and physical evidence (paw-casts, dead livestock, etc.) a regular secondary feature. Such reliance upon the truth of a narrator (here the eyewitness, but also the newspaper reporter) who may offer merely the kind of corroborative data which on close examination fails to be totally convincing, is a well-known characteristic of legend performance. In the end, the story cannot be confirmed because the Cat cannot be caught (except at Cannich!)—so that here again there is no proof which elevates the Cat from the status of verbal construct to zoological fact.

Looking at the stereotyped format and stereotyped description of the reports, it is easy to see evidence of a news-media process which not only standardizes accounts, but which may encourage people to misidentify other fleetingly-perceived animals like the deer, dogs and feral cats just mentioned. The reports may raise expectation to the point of *causing* someone to think that what they saw was a puma; the same reports may influence the wording of the animal's description when the witness is interviewed afterwards. Whether such 'media tutelage' has the power to make people fabricate or hallucinate big cat sightings would be an issue for further debate. There remains the suspicion or impression that some of our 'big cat' sightings are very flimsy indeed, and made to sound otherwise only by journalistic presentation. One may also suspect that, had the writer or editor cared to do so, the big cat story would have rejected as *too* flimsy and would never have been printed at all.

Our newspapermen and women report each big cat episode with a kind of playful excitement. They show no great desire to investigate the matter; they simply collect what everyone else has to say about it, from eyewitness to police spokesman to zoo expert. I cannot rule out the idea that, in the best traditions of contemporary legend narration, journalists relate big cat stories in whose literal truth and accuracy they have no interest and perhaps no actual belief. If a story is a 'good story', then its 'goodness' justifies it being told—or, to supply a terse formula for the same journalistic philosophy, if it's good, then that's good enough.

The Alien Big Cat has, for twenty-five years or so, been what British journalists regard as a good story. While some British big cat episodes may well have been genuine, too many others have been made to sound that way by writers who want to tell good stories which have an air of truth—legends, in plainer language. It is in this sense that we can talk about alien big cats as a type of contemporary folklore—and I hope without precluding the view that *some* of them truly *are* alien big cats.

57 Belmont Road,
Grays Thurrock, Essex RM17 5YJ

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A first version of this paper was given at the Conference on 'Imaginaire des Fauves et Félins' in Paris on 16 November 1990, sponsored by the French Department of the Environment's service of Research, Study and Information on the Environment.

NOTES

1. These figures are taken from G. B. Corbet and H. N. Southern's *The Handbook of British Mammals* (Oxford, London, etc.: Blackwell Scinetific Publications 1964, 1977). They ignore such factors as sexual dimorphism and seasonal weight-changes.

2. Di Francis, *Cat Country. The Quest for the British Big Cat* (Newton Abbot/London: David & Charles, 1983). The writer's hypothesis has not managed to persuade any zoological authority into belatedly recognizing a British big cat species.

3. Dr. Maurice Burton puts forward this objection in the article cited at Note 31. He finds particular significance in the comments of Stanley P. Young and Edward A. Goldman in their monograph *The Puma—Mysterious American Cat* (Washington, 1946) as to the elusiveness of this animal, even in areas where it is known to occur and even when sought by experienced woodsmen and naturalists. Dr. Burton contrasts the rarity of puma sightings in North American environments with the superabundance of reports from Surrey in the 1965-1966 period at which he writes; his argument being that if the puma is seldom seen by trained observers in habitats to which it is native, the notion of so many reports by untrained observers from an area where pumas are certainly *not* indigenous (Surrey!) contains a fatal flaw. I suppose it could be countered that an exotic large cat finding itself at liberty in a small, heavily residential area might behave in a more obstrusive or less discreet fashion than would be typical of the species; also, there would be far more people resident (and therefore available to witness it) than is true for most parts of the puma's natural native range.

4. For an application of Bayes's paradigm to anomalous events (and to the assessment of credibility of reports centred upon them) see Colin Rollo, 'Thomas Bayes and the Bundle of Sticks', *Society for Psychical Research Proceedings* Part 200 (December 1967). G. N. M. Tyrrell also has something to say of the 'faggot theory' in *Apparitions* (published under the auspices of the Society for Psychical Research by Gerald Duckworth Co., revised edition 1953), pages 29ff.

5. Despite its being cast as an evil homicide in numerous Western melodramas (e.g. *Track of the Cat,* 1954), scientific concensus affirms that the puma's reputation for man-killing, let alone man-eating, is largely unearned. Few writers would go along with Prof. E. L. Jordan's roseate declaration that 'there is no authentic record of an unprovoked attack on man'; James Clark, who quotes him to that effect in *Man is the Prey* (Andre Deutsch, 1969, pages 221-223), counters by saying there have been nine 'apparently authenticated' reports since 1948 and perhaps 'three or four dozen incidents this century, although most have been of a minor nature'. Even so, Clark does not hesitate to conclude that when left unprovoked the puma 'has never constituted a threat to man in any part of its range'. Edward R. Ricciuti (*Killer Animals*; New York: Walker & Co. 1976, pages 294-296) likewise discounts the savage stereotype: 'The number of known attacks by cougars on people does not surpass two dozen and probably is less than that.' Roger A. Caras's *Dangerous to Man: The Definitive Story of Wildlife's Reputed Dangers* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1976, pages 26-30), offers more detail on puma aggression towards humans, but still stresses its atypicality. Among the most interesting accounts in these sources are those where the victim was a small child, e.g. Vancouver Island, 12 June 1949 (Clark) and Associated Press report of 1962 (Caras).

6. See, for instance, Jim A. Johnston's 'The Skerray Beast' in *The Scots Magazine* NSIII:1 (April 1979) page 46-51. The motif emerges even more clearly in the popular press's treatment of the Black Beast of Exmoor, where abnormally high losses sustained by sheep farmers seem to have detonated an explosion of dramatic reports. (E.g. 'Commandos hunt down a killer cat', *Daily Express* 7 May 1983 page 7 and 'What's happened to the vicious beast of Exmoor?', *Sunday Express* 22 April 1984. Cf. Trevor Beer's more cautious verdict in *The Beast of Exmoor: Fact or Legend?* (Barnstaple: Countryside Publications, n.d.) where he distinguishes between putative big cat kills and those attributable to dogs. Elsewhere, livestock predation is only one element

(albeit a sensational one) of the story. An analysis of press reports collated by *Fortean Times* between July 1971 and August 1983 reveals that livestock attacks feature in at least 13 out of 80 cases.

7. These cases are mentioned and idiosyncratically interpreted by Charles Fort in *Lo!* (Gollancz, 1931, pages 126-151; or see the Dover edition of *The Complete Books of Charles Fort*, 1974, etc., pages 643ff.) Using the sources cited by Fort plus a few others that suggested themselves to me, I have found the original reports somewhat more restrained than this writer's treatment of them implies.

8. 'Modern Legends of Supposed "Wolves" in Epping Forest', *Journal of Proceedings of the Essex Field Club for February 20 1883-January 29 1887.* Vol. IV (1892), Supplement II; pages cciv-ccix.

9. Janet and Colin Bord, *Alien Animals: A Worldwide Investigation* (Paul Elek: Granada Publishing, 1980) pages 46-48.

10. My original source was 'Panther on the loose keeps Romans at bay', in the *Sunday Times* 13 May 1990, page A15. Other information appears in *Fortean Times* 55 (August 1990) page 16. I am indebted to Véronique Campion-Vincent for sending me a copy of Paolo Toselli's 'La Pantera Metropolitana' from *Tutte Storie* 1:1 (?1990) pages 4-9. The brief quote at the end of my paragraph is taken from Toselli.

10a. Véronique Campion-Vincent, 'Appearances of Beasts and Mystery Cats in France', *Folklore* 103 (1992), 160-83.

11. On the disappearance of the wolf and other large predators from Britain, see James Edmund Harting, *British Animals Extinct Within Prehistoric Times* (Trubner, 1880; see facsimile edition by Paul B. Minet, Chicheley, Bucks., 1972), (Bear: pages 3-32; wolf: pages 115-205); or Anthony Dent, *Lost Beasts of Britain* (Harrap, 1974), (Wolf: pages 99-134; wildcat: pages 83-96).

12. Jacques Vallee, *Passport to Magonia* (Neville Spearman, 1970).

13. Ronald Binns with R. J. Bell, *The Loch Ness Mystery Solved* (Open Books, 1983). See especially Chapter 3.

14. *Fortean Times* 53 (Winter 1989/1990), particularly Bob Skinner's piece on 'The Mowing Devil' (pages 38-39) and R. J. M. Rickard's discursive article 'Clutching at Straws, Whirls, Winds, Witches and Fairies' (pages 58-59). I am grateful to Jacqueline Simpson for informing me that the pamphlet was known to Hertfordshire folklorists previous to its reproduction in *Fortean Times*; see for example Doris Jones-Baker, *The Folklore of Hertfordshire* (London, 1977), page 107. It is in the W. B. Gerish MSS Collection in Hertfordshire County Records Office.

15. The Holinshed extract appears in the Bords' *Alien Animals* (see Note 9 for publication data), page 68, and in Graham J. McEwan's *Mystery Animals of Britain and Ireland* (Robert Hale, 1986) page 50. Both name their source as being Colin Clair's *Unnatural History* (Abelard-Schuman 1967, page 57) who refers to it as 'a rather curious passage'.

It may appear slightly less so if examined in the context in which it originally appeared. The 'newly augmented and continued' edition of the *Chronicles* by John Hooker and others (which extended the scope of Holinshed's historical survey up to 1586) places the passage in the fourth chapter in the Third Book of 'The Description of England', which was contributed by W.(illiam) H.(arrison). Therefore this Harrison, not Holinshed, seems to deserve recognition as the authority for the existence of lions in Scotland.

We should remark this writer's introduction to the chapter opines that 'It is none of the least blessings wherewith God hath indued this Island, that it is void of noisome beasts, as lions, bears, tigers, pards, wolfs, & such like'. Interestingly, he speaks of the wolf as a species extinct in England (though not in Scotland) due to King Edgar's policy of accepting wolf hides in lieu of tribute from the conquered Welsh: 'Since this time also we read not that any wolf hath been seen here that hath been bred within the bounds and limits of our country.'

If Harrison gives no encouragement to the idea of any native big cat species occurring in England, he appears equally unconvinced by the story of the Scottish lions, which he couples with a species of 'wild and cruel bulls'—only to emphasize that neither are 'now . . . heard of, or at least the latter scarcely known in the south parts'. Both suggest to him, however, that Britain was once linked with the European mainland. Finally and perhaps significantly, although the volume of the *Chronicles* devoted to Scotland contains a comprehensive list-cum-discussion of Scottish animals—including some monstrous, mysterious or cryptozoological ones—the lions receive no further mention.

16. Corbet and Southern (for publication details see Note 1) page 378. Their data is based on examination of 102 male specimens, the largest of which was 653mm head/body, 342mm tail and weight 6.9kg. Females are usually appreciably smaller. Cf. figures appended in Mike Tomkies's *My Wilderness Wildcats* (Macdonald & Jane's, 1977).

17. See, for example, Andrew Kitcher's 'No domestic bliss', *The Guardian* 7 June 1988, page 38.

18. *Alien Animals* (1980), page 70.

19. A selection of reports on putative English wildcats in *The Zoologist* might include the following: see the volumes for 1848, page 2282 (Derbyshire cat); 1849, page 2408 (Bulk, Lancs.); 1875, page 4376 (Ringwood, Hants); ditto pages 16 and 4377 (Hertfordshire); 1877, page 129 (Isle of Wight); 1884, pages 380-381 (Lincs.); 1890, pages 176, 215 (Yorkshire). In a number of these articles *The Zoologist's* editor, G. Newman, voices the suspicion that the specimens in question were feral cats; on this possibility, see also volumes for 1850 (pages 2721 and 2760) and 1875 (page 4453).

20. For a highly readable account of the Victorian craze for nature study and the key figures involved in it, see Lynn Barber's *The Heyday of Natural History 1820-1870* (Jonathan Cape, 1980).

21. It seems that the smooth snake's status as an unrecognized British species was mooted around 1859, when a specimen was examined at the British Museum. But doubts concerning the lack of precise detail about its provenance delayed the final acceptance of the reptile until Frank Buckland took up the matter in *The Field* some three years later. (See Vol. XX, pages 252, 276, 298, 319, 330, 360, 376, 436, 473 and 515). See also *Proceedings of the Zoological Society for London* for 1862. The celebrated London Zoo superintendent Abraham Dee Bartlett recalled that the first specimen he ever saw was the one produced from the pocket of a friend of his who stopped him en route to Regent's Park and asked him to identify the snake. This was on 24 August 1862; at the time Bartlett took it to be a very small common viper, the kind of mistake which helps us to understand how *C. austriaca* had escaped scientific recognition for so long. A good summary appears in M. C. Cooke, *Our Reptiles: A Plain and Easy Account of the Lizards, Snakes (etc.) Indigenous to Great Britain* (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1865. See pages 53-56).

22. The *Daily Telegraph* article which mentions current legends of escaped wild animals in London is reproduced in Thomas Boyle's *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1990). See pages 204-206.

23. Actually, Jan Harold Brunvand (*The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings.* London: Pan paperback edition, 1983; see Chapter 4) refers to 'Dreadful contamination'. This is a blanket term for stories which focus upon Americans' hygenic mores and their fear of 'dirty interlopers', thereby revealing 'a world of shocking ugliness lying just beneath a surface of tranquility and apparent wholesomeness'. As the contaminators are not infrequently of alien or non-white-American origin and/or otherwise alien to Western culture (snakes in Oriental rugs; tokens of dangers endemic to ethnic restaurants, the latter being studied further in Prof. Brunvand's *The Choking Doberman,* W. W. Norton 1984 pp. 118ff) the coining of 'alien contaminations' here seems permissible.

24. The New York Sewer Alligators legend is perhaps the best-known example of the Escaped/Released Dangerous Wild Animal Type. Prof. Brunvand's survey in *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (see note above) pages 76-83 draws on material in Patrick Mullen's 'Modern Legend and Rumor Foundation', *Jnl. Folklore Institute* 9 (1972) page 109, as well as citing Richard M. Dorson and others.

25. Anthony Dent's *Lost Beasts of Britain* (see Note 11) retells the story of Perceval Cresacre and the Barnborough Cat on pages 90 and 93. It is also alluded to in Ted Hughes's poem, 'Esther's Tomcat' (in *Lupercal,* 1960).

26. Jeremy Harte, *Cuckoo Pounds and Singing Barrows: The Folklore of Ancient Sites in Dorset* (Dorchester: Dorset Natural History and Archeological Society, 1986). See page 76.

27. Reports of Black Dog sightings were current in the Loughton and Epping area of Essex in 1989; see for example the local (Epping) edition of the *Yellow Advertiser* for 28 July that year, which alludes to previous sightings.

28. Di Francis, *op. cit.* (see Note 2), particularly pages 117-128. Differences in Black Dog and Alien Big Cat accounts are tabulated in Andy Roberts's *Cat Flaps!* (see Note 32 below), pages 32-36.

29. Harte, *ibid.*

30. 'Following the puma through wildest Surrey', *London Life* 30 July 1966, pages 16-17.

31. Dr. Maurice Burton: *The Elusive Monster: An analysis of the evidence from Loch Ness* (Rupert Hart-Davies, 1961). The same writer contributed an important article asking 'Is This The Surrey Puma?' to *Animals* 9:8 (December 1966), pages 458-461. Although no fully comprehensive study of the Surrey puma has appeared so far, the reader may care to consult the Bords' *Alien Animals* (pages 48ff.), McEwan's *Mystery Animals of Britain and Ireland* (pages 18ff.) and Chris Hall's article on 'Stalking the Surrey Puma' in *The Unexplained* (Orbis partwork, 3:29, pages 570-573).

32. On the Isle of Wight big cats—variously labelled lynxes or pumas—see: *Sunday Express* 29 April 1984 (page 11), and *Daily Express* 15 April 1985; *The News* (Portsmouth) 20 December 1984 and 17 June 1985. Lionel Beer (*op. cit,* Note 6) also mentions an Isle of Wight panther. For published details on other cases mentioned here, see: *Thurrock Gazette* and Thurrock edition of the *Yellow Advertiser* both for 11 November 1983 (Horndon Panther). *Mail on Sunday, Sunday Mirror* and *Sunday Express* for 21 April 1985 and *Daily Express* 22 April 1985 (Thetford panther; *The Mail (Hartlepool)* 4 August, 24 October, 30 October 1986 and *The Independent* 31 October 1986 (Durham puma/panther). This case also receives a chapter in Andy Roberts's *Cat Flaps! A Survey of Mystery Cats in the North of England* (Brigantia Books, 1987), pages 33-36. This monograph has chapters on the Harrogate Panther, the Rossendale Lion, the Nottinghamshire Lion, Thorganby Lion and Skegness Puma with other cases (Ilkeston and Chester) briefly covered. For the Powys Beast, see *Sunday Express* 10 September 1989. It may be worth noticing that both the Express papers tend to show a certain fondness for 'mystery cat' stories.

33. Dr. Maurice Burton, *Wild Animals of the British Isles* (Frederick Warne, 1977), pages 124-126.

34. The swamp cat road accident victim was reported in the *Daily Express* 30 July 1988. For a more comprehensive study of the Hayling Island sightings, see Nick Maloret's 'Swamp Cat Fever', *Fortean Times* 55 (Autumn 1990), pages 44-46. Factual data on *Felis chaus* can be found in C. A. W. Guggisberg's *Wild Cats of the World* (David & Charles 1975), where the animal's measurements are given as: average shoulder height 35-38cm, body length 60cm, tail 25cm, weight 5-9kg.

35. Karl Shuker, 'Feline Clues on the Moors', *Fortean Times* 52 (Summer 1989), pages 26-27.

36. Felicity, the Cannich Puma, passed away at the Highland Wildlife Park, Kingussie, in February 1985. A photograph of her, stuffed and mounted in readiness to go on display at the entrance to the Inverness Museum, appeared in *The Scotsman* 23 September 1985. A reprint of this picture can be seen in *Fortean Times* 46 (Spring 1986), page 46.

37. To gain some idea of the wealth of 'exotics' which have successfully settled in the British landscape, a reader could try R. S. R. Fitter's *The Ark in our Midst: The Story of Introduced Animals in Britain* (Collins, 1959), or Christopher Lever's more recent *The Naturalized Animals of the British Isles* (Hutchinson, 1977).

* * * *

Postscript: The Alien Big Cat story has inspired at least one film: Franco Rosso's much-praised version of the equally well-received novel, *The Nature of the Beast* (1987). To summarize from the *Sunday Times's* TV listings, the film centres upon a 14-year-old habitual truant's obsession with a livestock-slaughtering panther reported to be haunting the moors near his Lancashire home. 'His mission is to kill the beast, which is, of course, a metaphor for the blighted 1980s economy.' Though the writer does not say so, the crux of the film is the boy's instinctive feeling of rapport with the mystery beast and his failure to convince others that he has encountered it.